

John Gushue
The Evening Telegram
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Dear John,

In answer to your letter, billing St. John's as the oldest city in North America has been an irritant with me for years. My publishers even changed the name of my first volume of *The Story of St. John's* from my title *A City on a Hill* to their title *The Oldest City*, which often makes me cringe.

We assume there were fishery servants wintering in the harbour from the 1590s, when an order went out to merchants in England to leave behind caretakers of their various fishing properties in Newfoundland during the winter months, but no proof exists. Our first knowledge of people living in the community is found in a 1654 deposition made in England by the family of Thomas Oxford which states they had been resident in St. John's for 50 years, meaning they were living in the place from the early 17th century. Thus the Oxfords are the earliest residents of whom we have proof. That's rather late in the game when you consider the Spanish towns and even cities that had sprung up by then in Mexico and other Central American parts of North America. As far as cities go...Mexico City, or Tenochtitlan, as it was then known, had a population of over 100,000 the day Cortes first laid eyes on it...and there were other great Mayan and Aztec centres.

The Oxford dictionary defines a city as "*a title meaning above that of a town.*" It goes on to say "*In Great Britain and Ireland: Associated with episcopal seats, or royal burgs..*" Such definitions in no way entitle St. John's to be called a city until the 19th century. The oldest European city in North America is Vera Cruz, Mexico, which dates from the landing there of Cortes in 1519, and the establishment of a small port. It became a city in 1599. St. Augustine, Florida calls itself "*The oldest city in the U.S.*" It was founded in 1565 as a small Spanish settlement, on the site of an old Indian village, by Mendez de Aviles. As far as Canadian cities go the site of Quebec City was visited in 1535 by Cartier and founded as a town by Champlain in 1608. It was incorporated in 1833. The oldest incorporated City in Canada is Saint John, New Brunswick, established by the French as Fort La Tour in 1631, and incorporated in 1785, over 100 years before St. John's was incorporated. The best we can claim for St. John's is that it is possibly "*the oldest place occupied by (as opposed to settled by) Europeans north of Spanish America.*" But can we even claim that? What about the Vikings who lived years at L'Anse Aux Meadows? After all, Vinland was a European community...the first in the western hemisphere!

Paul
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